Partners in Innovation

After working together and successfully bringing innovation to the Memphis VA Medical Center, Indra Sandal, PhD, MBA Chief of Innovation, and David Dunning, MPA, Medical Center Director are now taking on new challenges at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa, Florida. They are excited about working together again and accomplishing big things in Tampa and beyond.

Dedicated to Service

When asked to describe herself in three words, Indra Sandal says she is a triple threat, **disciplined, dedicated, and determined** and those who know her strongly agree. Growing up in India as a part of a Veteran family, she says those three values and countless others have stayed with her throughout her life. "My dad was in the Indian Air Force for 35 years, that military discipline will always be with me," she says.

When Indra came to the United States from India as a student, she had a dream of working for the VA. She says, Veterans have taught her that if you want something you have to go after it. Serving nine million veterans, the VA is the largest healthcare provider in the country, and she really wanted to be a part of such an impactful organization. This was her dream, and she became relentless in pursuing it.

After becoming a US Citizen in 2013, a requirement to work for VA, she immediately began applying for roles. Her background is mainly scientific; she has a PhD in genomics and infectious diseases. After spending several years in research including Assistant Professor of Medicine at University of Utah, she wanted to pursue work in the healthcare innovation space. In 2014, she began working for the VA in Memphis as a research biologist and quickly recognized that moving into a higher position would require an MBA.

Much like her goal of working for VA, if she was going to get an MBA, it had to be from the best school. She made the decision that Kellogg was going to be the only school she would apply to, and it paid off. In 2017, she completed her executive MBA and hasn't looked back. Indra voraciously wanted to understand the management and leadership side of healthcare and relied on mentors to guide her – important mentors like Mr. David Dunning who came to Memphis as the new Medical Center Director in 2017. They quickly bonded over a passion for innovation and facilitated the Memphis VA to become an Innovator Network site through VHA Innovation Ecosystem in 2018. Within 2 years they put the Memphis VA on the map and became the #2 site in the country for number of innovation projects, after Cleveland VA.

Like Indra, David is also committed to service. He was in the Army for 30 years including two combat tours, one in Desert Storm and the other in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. David was the Commander of several large military hospitals and

went on to become the Comptroller for the Surgeon General and Commander of USA MEDCOM, which he describes as the pinnacle of his career.

At the end of his Army career, he felt a call to continue to serve and became the Medical Center Director at Memphis. David had his pick of top VA medical centers but chose to come back home to Memphis, despite it being a high-risk hospital at the time.

"I saw coming to the VA as a continuation of service," David says. "I'm still serving, going on 36 years. That drives me to keep serving my fellow Veterans and ensuring they get the care they need and certainly deserve. Personally, I get all of my care at VA and I couldn't be happier."

David believes that his experience serving in the military helps him to connect with Veterans on a personal level. Each Veteran carries unique experiences with them after service and identifying with aspects of those experiences helps David to lead in a truly Veteran-centric way.

"I always dream big; no idea is too big or too small. Nothing is impossible." -Indra

Defining Innovation

David has his own unique definition of innovation, **'innovation is the revolutionary process of blowing it up and doing things differently.** Innovation is not the evolutionary process of continuous process improvement, it is about refocusing and ensuring we are throwing out the inefficiencies of the past for a better future,' he says.

"When I came to Memphis, it was a struggling facility. It was on the VA's high-risk list. I wanted to change that by being innovative," David said.

Both David and Indra admit that bringing a culture of innovation to Memphis brought its own set of challenges. Making significant change requires support from everyone, those on the front line all the way up to executive leadership and certainly VHA Innovation Ecosystem. The biggest lesson they learned along the way is that innovation is about time, not money. VA hospitals are busy and front-line workers don't want to be tasked with even more work – they needed to put the right people in place who were ready to put in the work.

"I didn't have to go out and buy more people, I just had to change the way they were doing things," David says. "You have to empower people and ask yourself, 'Are you giving people the independence to dream big?"

Bringing Innovation to the VA Health System: Uber Health Connect Initiative

After Kellogg, Indra was promoted to Director of Innovation in VHA Innovators Network for the Memphis VA Medical Center, and was selected as a VHA Innovation Fellow in 2021, a VHA Executive Management Fellow in 2022, and launched the VHA-Uber Health Connect Initiative (VUHC). Her goal for this public-private partnership between VHA and Uber Health rideshare services was to help Veterans get to and from their appointments. The success of the Uber Health initiative was all about partnerships - whether it is partnering with the outside

2022 VHA INNOVATION EXPERIENCE

community, academic centers, or for-profit organizations, working together is how novel ideas come to life and this belief is the pinnacle to the long-term success Indra has achieved in innovation. Since launching IN 2022, Veterans have been provided nearly 30,000 rides saving the VA $35 million and that is just the beginning. The 14-month pilot recently concluded, and a significant phased rollout just began. The program will continue to be implemented at a new VA medical center every week, for a total of 60 VA sites in 21 states and 9 more VISNs by July!

"Patients are now on-time for appointments and their healthcare outcomes are dramatically improved," Indra says. "This innovative approach also saves VA money and can be repurposed for other things – like more innovation."

Joint Vision for Tampa

In early 2023, after an amazing run at the Memphis VA, David decided to take a role at the Tampa VA as the Medical Center Director. The dream team stayed together and shortly after; Indra came onboard as the Chief of Innovation. This was the first time a VA medical center had a position of Chief of Innovation, something she and David are very proud of. Indra believes it is important to think big if you are going to effectively bring innovation to any organization, which is how she leads the newly formed Tampa Innovation Ecosystem.

Indra recognizes that she has a lot of work to do but she will continue to make time for mentorship.

"I have had mentors help me along the way, I intend to do the same. Having a mentor is important as leaders move forward in their careers,"

she says. In fact, Indra is a Faculty Advisor to several VA Fellows participating in the MIT Catalyst Fellowship Program – a program designed to partner students with exceptional leaders to transform healthcare in truly novel ways.
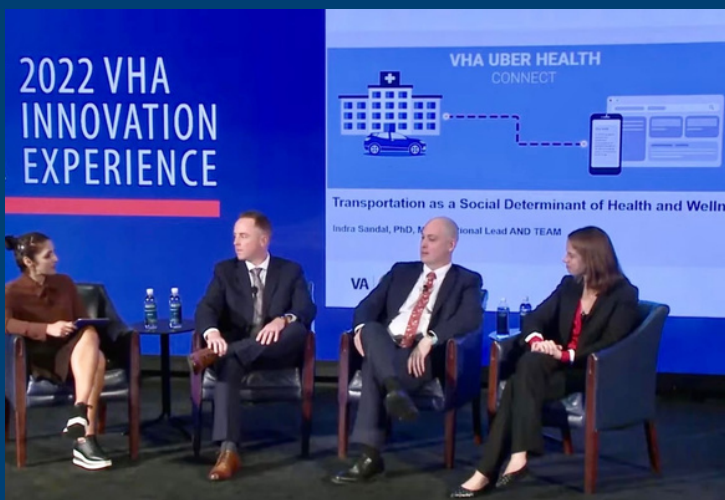
Speaking of MIT, Indra has participated in several MIT Hackathons as a participant, mentor and judge. Most recently she participated as a mentor during the MIT Grand Hack in Boston. She brought several employees from the Tampa VA to participate on 4 different teams, with the hope of expanding their experience and building excitement for the new Tampa Innovation Ecosystem being created. While there, the Tampa employees took home 6 awards, beating out 100's of other teams!

So, what is on the horizon for Indra, David and the Tampa team? Indra is in the process of creating a Tampa Innovation Ecosystem – a program not just for VA, but for the broader Tampa healthcare and innovation ecosystem. Her vision is to support an internal innovation grant program, like Spark Seed Spread to support home grown innovation, work in collaboration with MIT to bring Hackathons to Tampa, share the best of innovation in a reoccurring vodcast by way of Vu – a state-of-the-art virtual production studio, and eventually unique Innovation Fellowship program along with university and industry where she can continue to lead and inspire the next generation of healthcare innovators! As if that was not enough, Tampa VA intends to work towards build a physical innovation lab open to the greater ecosystem of partners, used to develop/co-develop innovation in 3D printing, AR/VR, AI and beyond!

> *"Having a culture of innovation is vital for success today," Indra says. "David and I are committed; we have no plans of looking back now."*

The journey to innovation starts with one person, someone just needs to open the door. For Indra, David opened the door to the incredible success she has already realized and the undoubtable success she and the Tampa VA are on the precipice of achieving!

MIT Grand Hack Winners

Michelle Schlesinger, *OTR/L, MOT, CSRS, (Second from the left)*

Kera Sumner, PharmD, *Ambulatory Care Pharmacy (On the right)*

Michael Sandelier, *MSRS, RRA, (Second from the left)*

While participating in the MIT Grand Hack, I experienced working together with a diverse group of individuals who were motivated to hack healthcare. It offered me the opportunity to network with others experienced in innovation as well as individuals at the MIT Grand Hack. Team development, brainstorming, research, project development, and exposure to different technology platforms were experienced as well. In the end, I enjoyed the process of working with a team that I will continue to be involved in and potentially solve a healthcare problem. I would go to the MIT Grand Hack again as it is a remarkable experience to advance, innovate, and solve healthcare problems.

It was an awesome opportunity to hack with other professionals interested in solving problems in today's health care system. Professionals from diverse backgrounds and from all over the world applied and participated. Not only did I learn so much from my fellow participants, but MIT surrounded the group with mentors and subject matter experts that were able to guide us along the way. This was my first hackathon and I would and plan to 100% participate again! My team won 3rd Place for the Decentralized Care track and we won the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Challenge award for promoting health equity for marginalized communities as well as reducing friction between payers, providers, and patients.

The problem my team worked on is the low success rate of clinical trials and recruitment. Our proposed solution is MedMatch. An app we developed that allows medical records to be securely uploaded. The app would contain a repository of clinical studies submitted by pharmaceutical companies and research facilities. The app would then take the medical records, filter the data, and match the diagnosis with an active clinical trial for that specific diagnosis.

VHA Innovation & MIT Catalyst Fellows
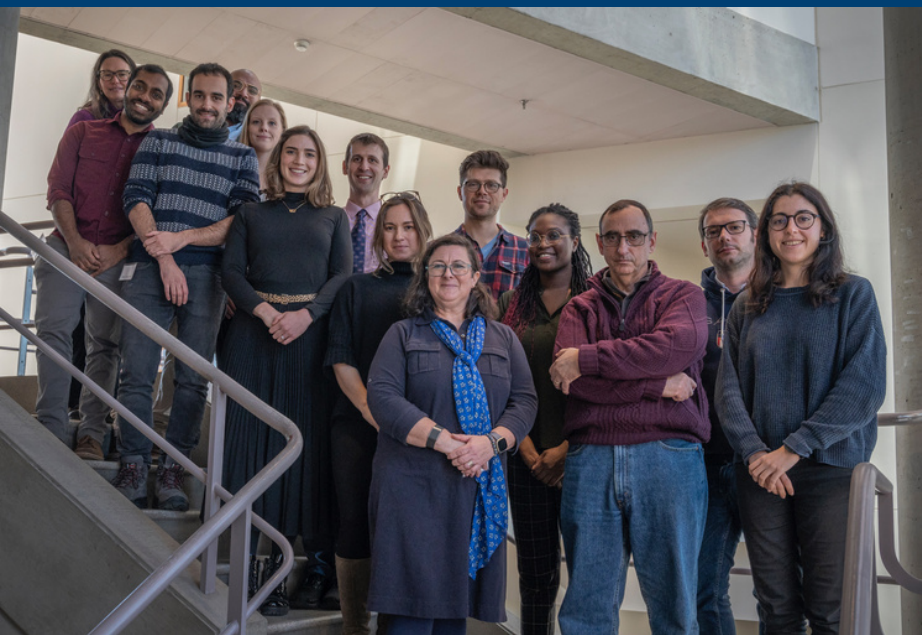
Laura Bajor

I'm a Navy vet from a sea-going family who served in both the enlisted and officer ranks so it's a privilege to be in a position where I can help advance the standard of care for my fellow veterans. I also served between the Navy and medical school as a test engineer at Aberdeen Proving Ground which was about the best "innovation on the job training" a person could ask for.
My time in ranks, particularly time at sea, gave me a definite appreciation for pulling together resources in novel ways to solve problems--when you're floating in the middle of an ocean and something needs to get done, you find a way.

Paul Albear

I am Trained Plastic Surgeon with an additional residency in Hand Surgeon and General surgery. I have a MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. I am an entrepreneur with a startup and a member of the Chicago Booth Angel Investors. Innovations is a way to move the needle in Healthcare. It is refreshing, fun and puts a bounce in my steps knowing we are trying to make a difference.

Candis Connell

Candis Connell is a clinical psychologist who found her passion in health psychology while serving the people of Hawaii. Her experience as an Army Veteran and her personal/professional strengths enable her to provide clinical care, develop Veteran and employee programming, and design training curriculums that drive innovation within VHA. Dr. Connell's focus on increasing employee access to wellness practices helps ensure that Veterans have consistent, reliable, and rewarding experiences when accessing their healthcare, while also improving employee retention within VHA. She currently holds a multi-role position as the Health Behavior Coordinator and National THRIVE Coordinator for the James A Haley Veterans Hospital and Clinics in Tampa, FL.

Jacquelyn M. Paykel

I have a long history of innovation to include: An all-natural skin care line for women of reproductive age; a surgical instrument to assist with 4th degree lacerations due to vaginal delivery; shared medical experience for women transitioning through menopause, the Sexual Health Incontinence and Pelvic Pain (SHIPP) clinic and THRIVE Shared Medical Appointments. Innovation means to me the ability to approach problems through the lens of integrating prior experiences to create a new way forward for age-old problems.